

Highway headaches all about patience

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"Patience, and the mulberry leaf, becomes the silk gown." Chinese proverb.

The familiar road barriers have sprung up in Phoenix, this time in the northern sections of the Valley. Interstate 17, south of the Carefree Highway, saw them first, last weekend. And along Arizona 51, north of Shea Boulevard.

Another long, dreary period of narrowed lanes and even greater congestion and slowdowns than normal for tens of thousands of motorists each day.

And we haven't even cleared out the light-rail detours south of Camelback Road and in downtown.

It's pretty exasperating. And city and state officials have very little to advise other than patience . . . which poets tell us lies excruciatingly close to . . . despair.

Except that these particular improvements, widening the old Black Canyon Highway, for instance, are long overdue.

Interstate 17, one of the three most important stretches of highway in Arizona, has been neglected while Arizona officials, lawmakers and voters all pushed for road construction elsewhere - Loop 101, Loop 202, Arizona 51 into northeast Phoenix, the extension of the Superstition beyond Mesa and building the Santan in the Southeast Valley.

All worthwhile projects.

But the old reliable Black Canyon, linking the Valley to Prescott, Sedona, the Verde Valley and Flagstaff, didn't get the same attention. Until now, with the population explosion in the North Valley, new suburbs like Anthem, and the continued increase of vacation homes in the north country, I-17 has been buckling under the pressure.

And now, the state Transportation Department, responding to priorities set by the Maricopa Association of Governments, has turned to accomplishing a major upgrade. Two new lanes, one general purpose, one high-occupancy, in both directions, north of Loop 101.

"Patience is a bitter plant, but it has sweet fruit." German proverb.

The widening of the southern portions of I-17 will ease the congestion from Anthem south. Currently, motorists funnel into those two lanes and traffic backs up. The additional HOV lane will eventually be an appealing incentive for suburban motorists to carpool and enjoy and even quicker commute.

Similarly, work has already begun on Arizona 51, north of Shea, adding HOV lanes all the way to Loop 101.

And the 101 will have 15 miles of HOV lanes paved from Princess to Loop 202.

All starting now. And work will continue throughout this year . . . and next year . . . and some into 2009.

And despite the hassle, despite the congestion, the waits, the project is worth it.

ADOT, fortunately, has a pretty good performance record in the past 20 years. And it will need a good performance here, because as a wise man once said: *"Abused patience turns to fury."*